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ABSTRACT

Enrollment success at private colleges was examined, based on a national study of private college presidents. Enrollment success postulated that colleges will experience enrollment stabilization or improvement if they function at a relatively fixed rate of growth over an extended period. The study was also based on the systems concept, which recognizes that multiple factors together affect enrollment. Attention was directed to the effects on enrollment of selected college characteristics, marketing practices, and presidential leadership. Questionnaire responses from 327 presidents from 43 states indicated that one-third of the colleges exhibited 10-year 1974-1984 nonsuccessful enrollment histories. Interviews were also conducted with private college presidents, administrators, and faculty to examine the college's enrollment condition, curricular and administrative structures, and marketing systems. Findings include: marketing practices employed by the colleges appear to be independent of college characteristics such as location, size, and age in terms of their effect on enrollment; and marketing practices are often selected because they have been useful at more successful colleges. Eight action strategies are recommended for private colleges. (SW)

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DETERMINANTS OF ENROLLMENT SUCCESS IN PRIVATE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

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DETERMINANTS OF ENROLLMENT SUCCESS IN PRIVATE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Presidential leadership and marketing practices are vital, but sporadic elements of enrollment success in private higher education. Assessment techniques and carefully defined roles in marketing can do much to enhance enrollment prospects.

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Despite more than a decade of informed speculation and research concerning demographic conditions predictive of declining enrollments, a perplexing phenomenon reported by higher education researchers has been the continuing optimism about enrollments evidenced by college and university presidents. Solmon found in 1975 that 40 percent of the presidents of private nonsectarian colleges expected increasing numbers of student applications. More recently, Baldridge, Kemerer, and Green reported that while 75 percent of 700 presidents surveyed indicated that competition is increasing, only 16 percent expected enrollment at their institutions to decline. Forty-two percent expected increased enrollments in the current decade. By the sheer weight of population projections alone--some states will annually have 40 percent fewer high school graduates by the 1990's than were present in 1979--this optimism seems ill-founded. Considered in context with constraints on institutional finance, such as changing federal financial aid policies, tax reform, public attitudes toward pricing and support of higher education, and intensified competition for private sector revenue, many institutions will be hard-pressed to maintain current enrollment.

Frequently such issues are magnified at private colleges and universities, particularly those which have experienced enrollment and financial stringency in the past decade. Slightly more than half of the postsecondary institutions in the United States are privately controlled. Most are small enrollment institutions with relatively high tuition levels and minimal endowment strength. Tuition is the primary source of income for these colleges. As described by Peck in Entrepreneurship as a Significant Factor in Successful Adaptation, many of these private institutions must rely on entrepreneurial presidents for growth and direction. This type of leadership is beyond the simple coordination of management activities. It involves assertive management of the institution and its marketing functions to ensure enrollment growth and stabilization. The leadership skills of the chief executive in the private college are a potentially critical determinant of enrollment success.

Dimensions of Enrollment Success. In its simplest form, enrollment success postulates that colleges and universities will experience stabilization or improvement in enrollment performance if they function at a fixed rate of growth (plus or minus five percent of their current enrollment) over an extended period of time. This article examines enrollment success in private colleges and universities in the context of a systems concept of determination (see Figure 1). The systems concept is important because it recognizes that multiple factors work in combination to produce enrollment success or non-success. To illustrate, factors such as institutional characteristics (location, size, student mix, mission, curriculum, tuition pricing, etc.), institutional marketing practices (direct mail, campus visits, faculty and student involvement in recruitment, publications, etc.), and presidential leadership interact to form an enrollment profile for the

institution. An obvious example of how these factors form a profile is the decaying institution in which the president is neither directly or indirectly involved in marketing resulting in enrollment declines which hamper the capacity of the institution to generate the resources required for renewal.

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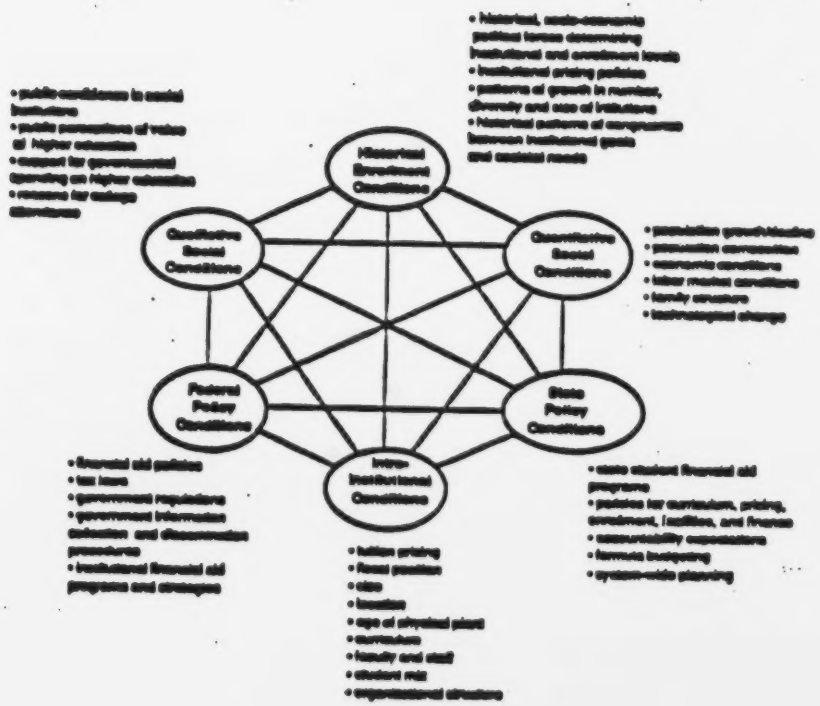
Traditionally, researchers such as Glenny, Bauer, Kerr, Breneman, Astin, Folger and Baldridge have looked at factors in the external environment--population growth/decline, economic conditions, technological change, public policy, etc.--to evaluate institutional prospects for enrollment. Other researchers have examined the effect of intra-institutional factors such as pricing and location on college enrollment. While some have questioned the effect of presidential leadership on enrollment, little research has been conducted which describes the nature of this relationship. This represents a serious void in our knowledge about influences on enrollment in colleges and universities which needs to be addressed through research.

This article focuses on determinants of enrollment success in private colleges and universities. Of particular interest are the effects that selected institutional characteristics, marketing practices and presidential leadership have on enrollment. Based on the results of a national study conducted in 1985, the article will show that:

ENROLLMENT SUBSYSTEMS



Marketing Practices

- Student aid from external sources
- Campus visits by prospective students
- Admissions personnel who are good counselors
- Image of individual attention for students
- Student aid from institutional sciences
- Printed materials
- Written correspondence with prospective students
- Physical appearance of the campus
- Image of institutional prestige
- Admission personnel who are good salespeople
- Phone calls to prospective students
- Career programs in the curriculum
- Current students recruiting new students
- Placement of graduates
- Secondary school visits to students
- College-owned residences for students
- Secondary school visits to high school counselors
- Liberal arts programs in the curriculum
- Faculty recruiting new students
- Co-curricular opportunities
- Direct-mail to solicit student interest
- Alumni recruiting new students
- Selective admissions policies
- College fairs
- Visits to students' homes
- Less selective admission policies

Enrollment Success

Increase Stabilization or Decrease in Enrollment

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(1) Enrollment performance is a product of factors inside of the college (institutional characteristics, marketing strategies, and presidential leadership) and factors promulgated by events and conditions outside of the college.

(2) Presidents and others at private colleges and universities with non-successful enrollment histories report nearly identical institutional characteristics as appealing to potential students as those reported by persons at successful institutions; yet, there is little understanding of how or why these characteristics determine success.

(3) Sparse evidence is available regarding the effectiveness of marketing practices in private colleges and universities with the result that traditional student recruitment and marketing practices are deemed very important by presidents irrespective of their actual benefits.

(4) Private college and university presidents maintain a public posture of strong optimism about enrollment prospects in the future, but temper this posture according to historical patterns of enrollment success or non-success in their institutions.

(5) Presidents tend to be enthusiastic about the widespread curricular reforms and support service adaptations which bolster diminishing enrollments, but faculty indicate institutional problems and skepticism in relationship to such changes.

Presidential Attitudes, Marketing and Enrollment Success. In Fall 1984, the total number of 1,723 presidents of privately controlled colleges and universities located in the 50 states and the District of Columbia, were mailed a 65-item questionnaire. Three-hundred and twenty-seven (327) presidents responded and returned usable questionnaires. Of this group, 110 presidents were affiliated with less selective liberal arts colleges, 27 were affiliated with highly selective liberal arts colleges, 67 with comprehensive colleges and universities, 11 with doctorate-granting and/or research universities, 55 with two-year colleges, and 57 with "other" institutions. Institutions from 43 states were represented of which more than one-third (34 percent) exhibited ten-year (1974-1984) non-successful enrollment histories.

Information was also obtained through on-campus interviews with presidents, key administrators, admissions staff, faculty, and selected students at six private colleges and universities geographically distributed throughout the country. Labels were assigned to these institutions, such as "Confident College," "Confused College," "Cozy College," and "Conservative College," to reflect self-reported and distinctive characteristics related to institutional type, location, and enrollment history. The institutions in this phase included: 1) a pair of colleges in the East--one successful and one non-successful in enrollment history--classified by the Carnegie Council as Highly Selective Liberal Arts Colleges; 2) a pair of institutions in the Middle West--one successful and one non-successful in enrollment history--classified by the Carnegie Council as Other Liberal Arts Colleges; 3) a pair of institutions in the West--one successful and one non-successful in enrollment history--classified by the Carnegie Council as Comprehensive Colleges.

The interviews were used to examine and understand each institution's enrollment condition, curricular and administrative structures, and marketing systems. A catalogue of observable themes was devised and interview transcripts were reviewed to identify individualistic themes of importance to each college. Information obtained through questionnaires and interviews was compared and contrasted and summary observations were recorded for each college. The key findings are described below:

Selected marketing practices employed by private colleges and universities appear to be independent of institutional characteristics such as location, size, age, curriculum, etc. in terms of their effect on enrollment. Certain

practices are rated "very important" by presidents in soliciting new students for institutions with a diverse array of characteristics. They are the following:

- Student aid (external sources)
- Campus visits by prospective students
- Admissions personnel who are good counselors
- Institutional image of individual attention
- Printed materials
- Written correspondence with students
- Attention to campus appearance
- Image of institutional prestige
- Admissions personnel who are good salespeople
- Career programs in the curriculum

Reflecting on characteristics of their institutions which attract students and thus are important for enrollment success, presidents uniformly select characteristics which are fixed in nature. "Location" and "campus appearance" evidence the greatest frequency of mention as institutional attributes which attract enrollment (see Table 1).

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

TABLE 1

Institution / Institutional Characteristics	Campus appearance	Location	Academic reputation	Friendliness	Successful alum	Community involvement	Character/tradition	Small size	Competitive price	Financial aid	Liberal arts curricula	Unusual curriculum	Social/cultural activities	Regional recognition	Prestige	Value for tuition dollar	Nearby colleges	Relaxed atmosphere	Intramural sports	Athletic reputation	Democratic faculty	Campus size
Conservative College	X	X												X		X						
Cozy College	X	X	X	X				X	X			X						X		X		X
Confused College	X	X		X		X											X					
Confident College	X			X	X		X	X			X				X						X	
Changing College	X		X		X	X	X															
Creed-bound College	X	X	X		X					X			X						X			

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Attributes which are subject to greater control--"community involvement," "unusual curricula," and "intramural sports"--receive fewer mentions. Those subject to absolute control such as the "degree of aggressiveness in the marketing program," are significant by their absence. Controllable elements of the admissions process in private institutions are not systematically integrated into the thinking of those who control them. Knowledge of the mechanisms by which institutional characteristics and marketing efforts operate in tandem is frequently lacking or ill-defined among presidents and admissions officers in private colleges.

Marketing practices are accepted and used by administrators not necessarily because of demonstrated effectiveness in a particular setting, but because they are observed to be useful at other, more successful institutions. One of the surprising findings in the study is the high degree of uniformity in presidential attitudes toward the importance of certain marketing practices across all institutional types regardless of enrollment success or lack thereof. It would be expected that marketing efforts would be closely scrutinized at failing institutions to ensure the elimination of less effective practices in favor of those which exhibit more promise. Average responses from the presidents and the rankings of averages for twenty-six marketing practices are presented in Table 2. The averages are located on a 7-point scale with a score of "7" labeled "Very Important," and a score of "1" labeled "Not Important."

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Nearly all of the presidents indicate that many practices are included in marketing programs because wide usage by other institutions suggests that these are critical to enrollment success. The presidents of non-successful institutions tend to assign greater importance to tested marketing practices. They indicate deep interest in the mechanics of various marketing processes and "quick-fix" recruiting techniques.

Private college presidents do not think analytically or systematically about different practices or definitions of role as they develop and assess marketing strategies. Although information collected from presidents through questionnaires and interviews indicated that they play an important role in the efforts of their institutions to achieve enrollment success, this role is often poorly focused. The reasons are several:

(1) lack of research-based information about the relative effectiveness of marketing practices in use at the institution;

(2) inability to make informed judgments about marketing strategies;

(3) unpatterned thinking about marketing practices resulting in the adoption of fragmented approaches rather than integrated plans;

(4) uncertainty over what is an appropriate level of presidential participation in the management of the institution's marketing effort.

TABLE 2

Marketing Practice	All Institutions ~~Entire Sample~~		Successful Institutions		Nonsuccessful Institutions	
	Rank	Average	Rank	Average	Rank	Average
Student aid from external sources	1	6.44	2	6.36	1	6.60
Campus visits by prospective students	2	6.41	1	6.43	2	6.36
Admissions personnel who are good counselors	3	6.25	3	6.24	4	6.28
Image of individual attention for students	4	6.13	4	6.12	7	6.14
Student aid from institutional sources	5	6.07	8	5.98	3	6.31
Printed materials	6	6.06	5	6.01	6	6.17
Written correspondence with prospective students	7	6.05	9	5.96	5	6.20
Physical appearance of campus	8	6.02	6	6.01	10	6.03
Image of institutional prestige	9	6.01	7	6.00	8	6.05
Admissions personnel who are good salespeople	10	5.93	11	5.85	9	6.05
Phone calls to prospective students	11	5.85	12	5.78	11	5.97
Career programs in the curriculum	12	5.84	10	5.87	12	5.77
Current students recruiting new students	13	5.57	13	5.52	14	5.66
Placement of graduates	14	5.47	14	5.50	21	5.37
Secondary school visits to students	15	5.47	15	5.40	15	5.60
College owned residences for students	16	5.43	17	5.31	13	5.70
Secondary school visits to high school counselors	17	5.39	16	5.34	17	5.54
Liberal arts programs in the curriculum	18	5.31	18	5.25	18	5.49
Faculty recruiting new students	19	5.26	19	5.13	16	5.56
Co-curricular opportunities	20	5.20	20	5.11	19	5.41
Direct-mail to solicit student interest	21	5.18	21	5.08	20	5.39
Alumni recruiting new students	22	5.11	22	5.00	22	5.31
Selective admissions policies	23	4.77	23	4.86	23	4.86
College fairs	24	4.65	24	4.57	24	4.64
Visits to students' homes	25	3.92	25	3.70	25	4.39
Less selective admissions policies	26	3.04	26	3.03	26	3.00

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Of the six institutions visited, four conducted virtually no research on the effectiveness of marketing techniques. In many instances, presidents and admissions professionals made important decisions concerning marketing strategies based on a combination of previous experience and whatever random observations they could bring to bear on their institutional situations. The number of factors associated with enrollment success and the complexity of their interrelationships discourage the use of evaluative measures to determine whether particular marketing strategies elicit desired enrollment results.

Presidents tend to represent their attitudes toward enrollment prospects positively, although gradations of presidential optimism are apparent regarding the relative enrollment success of institutions over the past ten years. Presidents whose institutional enrollments have declined more than 6 percent over the past ten years tend to evaluate the enrollment performance and potential of their institutions positively. Despite the enrollment circumstances faced by the institution, an almost universal attitude of public optimism is required of chief executives. One president termed this the "Rotary Club Syndrome," that is, the best face is given to all institutional matters in public. Another postulated that the converse of this phenomenon--pessimism among presidents regarding enrollment prospects "must be next year's turnover rate." Privately, the presidents of non-successful institutions were less likely to express unreasonable optimism, yet they did deem it necessary to maintain a public veneer of positive thinking.

Private college presidents tend to evaluate the need for their involvement in marketing and recruiting at some level consistent with the current institutional effort, but few are able to discuss strategies and outcomes with any degree of precision. Substituted for a more rigorous approach to management of enrollment marketing with traditional student populations are adaptations--often quite successful--to offset shortages in student numbers. Such practices as weekend colleges or evening programs for part-term adult students are quite common, as are off-campus centers and contractual arrangements with profit and not-for-profit institutions for educational services.

These practices may, in part, account for the unexpectedly stable enrollment in private colleges and universities over the past few years. However, faculty and academic administrators report frustration over the emphasis given to innovative programs and resentment over resources which are spent to promote what are perceived to be "quasi-educational" services. New problems develop as presidents are perceived to give little or no attention to the negative feelings of faculty; adaptations require inordinate amounts of personnel time and resources to become successful, potentially leading to additional erosion of traditional enrollments; and there is little concern for definition of the meaning and implications of these adaptations in relationship to the historical mission of the institution. If programmatic adaptations are managed wisely through all stages of their development, they may enhance the survival prospects for some private institutions. If they are poorly managed, or allowed to develop at the expense of traditional programs, there is strong potential for institutional instability.

Action Strategies. Most of the strategies employed by colleges and universities to enhance enrollment are focused on marketing and recruiting activities to draw additional students to campus or retention activities to diminish the number of students leaving prior to graduation. Concern about enrollment is manifested in particular ways: the president voices concern about the applicant pool, the director of admissions enlists the help of a consultant to implement new marketing techniques, the board of trustees examines long-range enrollment prospects with the president in executive session. These and other actions do not rely on assessment and research as tools which enable an institution to effectively gage its position in the marketplace and to selectively implement marketing techniques which balance benefits and costs. Private colleges and universities will need to address four E's in the 1990's in order to ensure effective enrollment performance: efficiency, effectiveness, enhancement and evaluation. Presented below are action strategies in each category that require consideration by private colleges and universities based on the findings of research.

Efficiency

(1) Evaluate the cost-benefits of current marketing practices. Many private colleges employ student recruitment techniques which are of questionable value because presidents and marketing professionals assume that commonly accepted practices must be effective. Private colleges should implement marketing practices in accord with specific evaluative measures aimed toward documentation of the number and quality of students produced along with an estimate of the cost of retaining or abandoning a specific practice.

(2) Develop campus-based professionals in marketing and recruitment. Private colleges which require specific qualifications for professional personnel--e.g., terminal degrees specific to certain disciplines--do not require a similar level of preparation for those responsible for marketing and recruitment. It is not an unusual practice to draw admissions personnel from the ranks of faculty whose disciplines are undersubscribed and recent graduates or others with little or no experience in marketing. The marketing function is too critical to the continuing vitality of private colleges and universities to be directed or staffed by excess, untrained, or inexperienced personnel.

Effectiveness

(3) Enhance the utilization of marketing in institutional planning. Attitudes toward the student marketing function at many private institutions are ambivalent; that is, results expressed in terms of actual student enrollments are of concern, but inputs from marketing personnel are seldom sought at the planning stage in curricular and enrollment decisions. This condition obtains as the result of the historical placement of admissions and recruiting in the organizational structure of private institutions. Assessment should be undertaken of the need for administrative restructuring in order to give marketing personnel a strategic role in planning and decision-making processes of the institution related to enrollment.

(4) Affirm the central role of the president in the institution's marketing effort for enrollment success. Nearly all parties to decision making in private colleges agree that presidents play a key role in

institutional marketing, but few can identify specific elements of that role. A clear definition of role is needed which places the president in a strategic position to provide leadership for the marketing effort in contrast to responsibility for operational functions such as implementation and evaluation. This does not imply greater time involvement than most presidents are now spending; it does imply more effective use of time through insistence on precise data and useful analysis.

(5) Avoid fragmentation in marketing and student recruitment through involvement. In previous research, Mortimer and McConnell established that shared authority existed in only 25 percent of all institutions of higher education in 1967. This condition continues today in the area of marketing and student programming. Tension over institutional adaptations to counteract enrollment decline results in fragmentation of staff and constrains the capacity of the institution for effective response to changing conditions. The appropriate response would be to appoint teams of faculty and administrators to study the short- and long-term enrollment needs of the institution, to convene an inclusive task force to examine factors influential in institutional enrollment as a prelude to recommendations for marketing and recruitment, or to include faculty wherever possible in enrollment marketing efforts and planning.

Enhancement

(6) Improve the image and market appeal of private colleges through documentation of the benefits of college attendance. Tuition pricing is a primary concern of students in decisions

about enrollment in private colleges. Institutional publications used to market the college to prospective students do little to "neutralize" the cost factor in college choice. The focus of these publications is on college curricula, services, and characteristics of campus life--information which is important to students as a "consumption benefit" but provides limited information about the "investment benefits" of college attendance. Private colleges should modify their marketing publications to include information about investment benefits: short- and long-term career mobility, advanced earnings, occupational prestige, community involvement, advanced education, improved quality of life, enhancement of knowledge and practical skills, and conceptual understanding.

(7) Develop a compelling image for the institution based on the concept of "uniqueness" that elicits broad support from faculty, administrators students, trustees, and staff. Too often the image of private colleges and universities is one of constancy in curriculum, campus appearance, faculty, and academic policies. The only factors subject to change are tuition, financial aid and recruiting practices depending on market forces. Each college should develop a compelling image based on unique features of its campus environment. For example, integration of academic and student affairs to produce a "total approach" to student development, innovative approaches to general education which enhance student mobility in careers through accentuation of characteristics desired in the professions and experimental residential life programs which expose students to life and work values outside of college through participation in community service activities.

Evaluation

(8) Assess the effects of enrollment-driven programmatic adaptations on all facets of organizational structure and functioning, not only on the number of enrolling students. While there is ample evidence of creativity among private colleges which are scrambling to introduce strategies to offset declining numbers of traditional students, there is little corresponding evidence that these strategies are evaluated in accord with a range of measures which include assessment of faculty attitudes and vitality of the institutional mission. The data suggest a balanced view that adaptive programs are demonstrably critical to institutional well-being, but that questions regarding alterations in traditional goals are sufficiently weighty to warrant serious attention from faculty and administrators. Attitudes, resource commitments, and outcomes must be thoroughly analyzed.

The organizational change that each of these strategies will require will vary according to each institution's administrative history and current enrollment situation. This is a time of unusual challenge and opportunity for private colleges and universities which calls for aggressive responses. Presidents, faculty and administrators--through carefully defined roles in marketing and recruiting--can do much to enhance prospects for enrollment success.

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